Radical Roots

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Published by Amherst College Press

Meringolo, Denise D.
Radical Roots: Public History and a Tradition of Social Justice Activism.

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Exhibiting Ourselves
The Making of a Community Museum in a National Institution

Michèle Gates Moresi

The black public sphere—as a critical social imaginary—does not centrally rely on the world of magazines and coffee shops, salons and highbrow tracts. It draws energy from the vernacular practices of street talk and new musics, radio shows and church voices, entrepreneurship and circulation. Its task is not the provision of security for the freedom of conversation among intellectuals, as was the case with the bourgeois public spheres of earlier centuries. Rather, it marks a wider sphere of critical practice and visionary politics, in which intellectuals can join with the energies of the street, the school, the church, and the city to constitute a challenge to the exclusionary violence of much public space in the United States.

—the Black Public Sphere Collective, April 1995

This description of a Black public sphere captures the essence of the early years of the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum at the Smithsonian Institution. In 1967, as an experiment to reach underserved minority audiences in Washington, DC, the Smithsonian opened a storefront museum in the economically depressed and predominantly African American neighborhood of Anacostia, four miles distant and separated from the National Mall by the Anacostia River. The young museum’s staff, together with local residents, created exhibition language and visual representation that consistently challenged the validity of dominant portrayals of Black people, both past and present. Anacostia Neighborhood Museum (ANM) exhibitions focused on
contemporary urban problems relevant to current community concerns and intended to educate its audience, although not in a didactic manner. Some exhibits, such as *The Rat* and *Lorton Reformatory*, were directly relevant to the situations and everyday experiences of the neighborhood residents and, in this sense, spoke the vernacular of the street. The exhibit creators—museum staff and community members—were engaged in an intellectual endeavor to overtly politicize the museum, as demonstrated by the museum’s first pamphlet in 1968: “Dear Friend, Welcome to the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum. You have just entered an institution that is your own. You and your family are welcome seven days a week. The director and his staff are at your disposal, and urge you to voice praise or criticism of what you see here. . . . THIS IS YOUR MUSEUM.” The words are welcoming and inviting, which foregrounds the museum’s mission to extend itself to a community usually ignored by the museum world. More than public outreach, however, the museum staff actively engaged their audience to participate in museum planning. Not a passive audience, Anacostia residents took part in the brainstorming, creation, and implementation of exhibits and programs. ANM staff consciously conferred power to their primary audience.

Initially, the new museum’s goal was to bring the Smithsonian to the people. Through their efforts to collaborate with local residents, the director and staff transformed the ANM into a museum of and for the people. Emerging in the midst of the Black power movement, ANM manifested one of the ways that ideals of racial pride and control over representations of Black people’s past, present, and future could be realized. With the prestige of being a Smithsonian museum, ANM not only provided a successful model for the community-based museum but also signaled to the museum world a change in the way that museums could represent and relate to minority communities through active engagement and shared authority.

This community-focused museum of Black history and culture was not something Smithsonian administrators and officials ever envisioned. An African American museum stood in stark contrast with previous Smithsonian positions that asserted national, holistic representations, and avoided specialization in any one ethnic or racial group. The ANM had begun as an outreach program and was originally envisioned as a children’s science museum that would serve as an arm of the Smithsonian and encourage Anacostia residents to visit other Smithsonian museums on the Mall. Under the direction of John R. Kinard, with the influence of participating residential
committees, and in the culturally radical climate of the late 1960s, the ANM became instead a highly successful community-run museum that advanced Black consciousness and pride. However, by the ANM’s fifth-year anniversary in 1973, the staff, particularly the director, began to reconsider the museum’s direction and its place within the Smithsonian family. Marginalized by both its location and its philosophy, the museum needed to evolve in scope and vision in order to survive. In 1987, the word neighborhood was dropped from the museum’s official name as part of the initiative to broaden its range. Although the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum served to ameliorate some of the tensions about exhibiting African American history and culture in the 1960s, its evolving mission ultimately contributed to the Anacostia Museum’s continued marginalization in the national narrative.

**Black Power and the American Museum**

The Anacostia Neighborhood Museum was at the cusp of a growing movement to democratize and politicize the museum. The conferring of power to the museum audience was a transformation of the original outreach program idea that occurred in the intensifying atmosphere of the Black power movement and the antiestablishment activism of the era. The consciousness raising of various activist groups such as those involved in the civil rights movement, those opposed to the Vietnam War, and advocates for Black power all contributed to intense criticism of American cultural institutions, which were seen as upholding the status quo.

Until the late 1960s, museums had professed a position of neutrality in social and political matters. However, activists turned their attention to supposedly neutral cultural institutions and pointed to the role of museums in sustaining the oppressive ideologies of the dominant culture. In 1970, the American Association of Museums’ annual meeting in New York was disrupted by protestors from the New York Art Strike and Art Workers’ Coalition—an alliance of artists, feminists, and various minority groups—which criticized museums for ignoring the social crises of the times. The speaker, Ralph Ortiz, director of Museo del Barrio, accused museums of “complicity in the atrocities of our day through their failure to take a stand on the vital issues of our times.” The American Association of Museums passed some of the strikers’ demands in a resolution, which recognized “racism, sexism, and repression as the most pressing social issues of the day” and resolved to work to end them.
The Anacostia Neighborhood Museum was one of very few major museums to take on the challenge of the new demands of a changing audience. While the number of local museums, historical societies, children’s museums, and various outreach programs dramatically increased between 1960 and 1980, very few museums attempted to broach topics that were contemporary or controversial before 1970. The Metropolitan Museum of Art has been identified as the major art museum to produce an exhibition addressing the social concerns of its day: *Harlem on My Mind*, in 1969. The exhibition displayed photographs documenting the artistic, intellectual, and social institutions of Harlem since the turn of the century. The Metropolitan’s new director, Thomas Hoving, had embraced the show because he had believed in the art museum’s role “to relate art to practical life, and practical living to art.” Hoving and the exhibition’s curator had expected the show to be condemned by art critics as “not art” and politically motivated. However, the heated controversy and protests to the show took them by surprise. Black artists picketed the museum in protest of the museum’s display of African Americans as subjects and its failure to exhibit art by African Americans. Newspapers, radio, and television broadcast the controversy, which intensified when the Jewish Defense League objected to the exhibition’s catalog because they claimed it contained anti-Semitic remarks. The criticism and public controversy it generated seemed to confirm some people’s view that museums are and should be above politics.

As protesters articulated and ANM staff were aware, the museum was indeed a site of political contention regardless of the content of exhibits. The representation of a dominant and mostly elite culture by the country’s most prestigious museums reified the social and economic status quo in terms of “culture.” Indeed, there is a dramatic contrast between the blockbuster style of exhibition of the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s *Harlem on My Mind* and ANM’s community-based approach. Despite their best intentions to heed the call of protestors, curators of *Harlem on My Mind* in effect treated the subject of their art exhibition as an abstract group to study and display. ANM staff cultivated the desires and point of view of the subject, engaged them along the way in the exhibition process, and subsequently, developed a new model for museum exhibition practice.

As a minority community with recognition by the nation’s official repository of national culture, the people of Anacostia gained a platform on which to negotiate these political and cultural issues in their own terms.
African Americans were not regular visitors to Smithsonian museums on the Mall, and this was one of the reasons frequently cited to create a neighborhood museum in the first place. Reflecting upon why African Americans did not visit Smithsonian museums on the Mall, John R. Kinard stated, “The problem was that the black man did not see himself in those jobs or in those exhibits, so he wasn’t going to embarrass himself by paying respect to what essentially represented cultural pressure.” To relieve that cultural pressure, the people of Anacostia demanded a museum that was relevant to their circumstances and to their developing notion of African American culture.

This desire for self-definition was the point at which varied groups of the Black power movement converged. William Van Deburg has demonstrated the centrality of the cultural sphere to Black power advocates’ call for the power to define themselves. Whether adhering to a strict separatist doctrine, seeking peaceful coexistence within a culturally diverse society, or some other variant of Black power ideas, all proponents looked to a revision of history and culture as a crucial step toward real change. They all believed psychological oppression to be as potent as political and economic oppression. Therefore, psychic liberation depended on revisiting the past to acknowledge Africa as a rich, dynamic culture and to reveal African Americans as not merely victims of American injustice but as a resilient community with its own traditions and triumphs. The building of pride in an ancestral Africa and a valued African American culture was key to a Black power agenda of community empowerment.

As one scholar has noted, for African Americans, a pride in Blackness was a way to deal with the dilemma of integration: while integration through legal avenues sought to rectify injustices of inequality, it did not directly address the problem of cultural negativity that sustained portrayals of Black racial inferiority. Within the Black community, writers, artists, and activists identified Black self-hatred as part of the problem. A heightened awareness of systematic oppression and a newfound pride in “Blackness” were a counter to the feeling that assimilation would compromise one’s ethnicity and self-identity; they were a response to accusations of wanting to “become White” and identifying with the source of one’s oppression.

In resisting and turning on its head racist ideology that depicted Black bodies as unattractive and less than ideal, the “Black Is Beautiful” mantra countered such negativity. People celebrated Black skin color and “going natural” became at once fashionable and political. Black pride and a heightened sense
of the need to assert Black culture and history became widespread in all facets of society. From the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, the Black Arts movement flourished and cultural activists, especially those in drama, poetry, and music, founded Black repertory theaters and organizations across the country. In an effort to define Black art and affect the consciousness of Black people, artists rejected Western standards, which often applied a strict dichotomy of art and politics, and instilled their work with messages of Black pride and unity. Described as the “spiritual sister” of Black power, proponents of a Black aesthetic emphasized the function of art to transform the artistic sensibilities of African Americans away from a demoralizing “White aesthetic” to a self-affirming Black one. People applied the creative sentiments of Black power often by performing them in conjunction with street rallies and demonstrations, blending the worlds of creative arts and political activism.17

African American writers disseminated messages of Black power to take psychic control of their lives and their culture. In his autobiography, Malcolm X demonstrates his own self-loathing, his alienation, and how, as Detroit Red, he aspired to “become White.” Malcolm X exhorts readers to know themselves, to know the truth about African American culture through African history and religion.18 Playwrights, poets, and magazine writers aimed their works directly to the Black community, and a proliferation of bookstores and sales indicates that Blacks were reading their messages. The Black Academy of Arts and Letters formed in 1969 in order to give recognition to Black artists and scholars such as Amiri Baraka, W. E. B. Du Bois, Paul Robeson, and George Jackson.19

Militant student activism was widespread and encompassed an array of social concerns; increasingly in the late 1960s, African American students participated in campus protests that called for Black studies programs and more Black representation within university infrastructure. In many universities, students demanded and faculty agreed that traditional curricula needed to be reformed.20 By 1970, more than 170 colleges and universities established Black studies programs that ranged from several courses to entire departments.21

The Black power movement and its widespread manifestations in art, theater, literature, and the academy alienated most Whites. Generally, it conjured feelings of reverse racism for White people, who often accused Blacks of failing to remain “objective.” Historian Daniel J. Boorstin, for instance, commented on the effect of Black power on contemporary scholarship: “Future Historians will doubtless begin to be wary of the books on the history of the Negro in the United States when they find the word ‘Negro’ being displaced by
The sentiments of Black power applied all aspects of culture—including art, literature, and fashion aesthetics—that celebrated and dignified Blackness. Copyright Institute of African American Affairs. Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Black Creation 1, no. 1 (1970). The sentiments of Black power have tended to inflame the subject without proportionately illuminating it, and has become the Trojan Horse of a new racism.”22 Such sentiments advanced by leading academics shaped views and raised doubts for some Smithsonian staff regarding the scholarship of ANM projects.
Whether in the realm of arts, academics, or politics, there were some basic interrelated tensions that existed in demanding and implementing an emphasis on African American culture in the museum: there was always the question of autonomy or control over an event or program, the need to establish legitimacy, and the issue of political (rather than apolitical) motives. These issues shaped the mission and identity of the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum as it changed over time.

From New Idea to New Museum
By 1966, the Smithsonian’s newly appointed secretary, S. Dillon Ripley, sought to enliven the institution’s mission by expanding the museum audience and reaching out to communities traditionally neglected by museum programs. In a speech presented at the American Association of Museums meeting
during the fall of 1966, Ripley had suggested that museums make the leap to reach broader audiences by renting buildings in low-income neighborhoods and installing exhibits that could be touched and operated. The Smithsonian held informal exploratory meetings with various community representatives and reached an agreement with the Greater Anacostia Peoples’ Corporation, a nonprofit civic group, to open the experimental museum in the old Carver Theater on Nichols Avenue in Anacostia.23

In the fall of 1966, Ripley issued an institution-wide call to curators and division heads for ideas about exhibits for an experimental storefront museum. The initial concept was for “a small, neighborhood museum that people who do not normally visit our museums could use easily and casually.” In addition, many believed that a storefront museum would be filled with artifacts that could be touched and handled by the visitor. Exhibits would be unstructured and simplified, and objects were to be self-explanatory: “We feel that such a ‘drop-in museum’ should be very low-keyed, without a formal theme or structured program or elaborate exhibits.”24 The imagined visitors were primarily youth who came from economically depressed and educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. Many suggestions for exhibits drew on children’s museums and hands-on science museums for their inspiration.25 Other suggestions proposed something like a “curiosity shop.” The hope was that people would become interested, engaged, and excited enough about museums so that they would be encouraged to venture to the Smithsonian museums on the Mall.

Early in the first planning stages of the ANM, neighborhood residents and Smithsonian staff formed the Anacostia Advisory Committee and met weekly. Smithsonian representatives—such as John Anglim, chief of the Office of Exhibits, Ben Lawless, chief of exhibits for the Museum of History and Technology (MHT), and Keith Melder, curator of political history at MHT—met with interested residents of Anacostia regularly to discuss everyone’s expectations for the new museum. The advisory committee had no formal structure in order to avoid slighting anyone, although a chairman and vice chairman were selected.26 Meetings held in the summer of 1967 were open to all residents of the neighborhood, and the participation rate was high. In an era when community activism was dynamic and people felt their participation might be effective, Anacostia residents did not hesitate to join in the meetings. One participant observer recalled, “It was early summer. The air-conditioning wasn’t working, so the doors were wide open and anyone could
walk in, sit down, and take part in the discussion. . . . No formal notices were sent out; the message spread by word of mouth. Most of the time, from 35 to 50 people met every week to plan for a museum that would be the first of its kind in the world.  

Planning for the museum required community engagement, and all aspects of the project were open for discussion and negotiation. Contrary to Ripley’s account of the first consultations that led to the agreement, neighborhood residents were at first doubtful and a little suspicious of the Smithsonian’s efforts. Some felt unsure that a museum would be truly helpful to the community, and some even thought that a museum would be irrelevant to their immediate concerns. Anacostia residents also felt apprehension about how a museum, particularly a traditional museum, might treat the culture and lifestyle of the neighborhood. Nonetheless, residents entrusted their community leaders with the final decision to accept the Smithsonian’s proposal. In the evolution of the idea about how ANM would actually operate and the kinds of exhibits it would produce, residents eventually shifted the focus of a “touching museum” to projects that dealt with local urban problems and, more broadly, African American history and culture.30

The experimental museum’s first staff members consisted of just four people. The director, John R. Kinard; Zora B. Martin, an educator; Edgar Tyler; and William Wilson. Six additional people served as “special assistants” and all, except the museum director, were employed on a temporary basis for the first year. Larry Erskine Thomas joined the team as a researcher and designer shortly after the museum first opened. As one of the major concerns expressed by the community had been about whether the museum would provide jobs, Smithsonian officials (such as Charles Blitzer) promised that museum positions would be filled by residents whenever possible. Six of the initial museum team, including Kinard and Martin, were local residents.32

The Anacostia Neighborhood Museum opened September 15, 1967, to the music of multiple bands and a block party accompanied by speeches and klieg lights. In the months leading up to the opening day, neighborhood residents had been the primary drivers of the museum’s planning and implementation. While Smithsonian curators, designers, and engineers had enthusiastically worked to renovate the building and plan exhibitions, residents were the mainstay of the museum’s implementation. The neighborhood advisory committee, youth groups, and passersby picked up paintbrushes and brooms
to refurbish the old building that would become the museum. The empty lot next to the refurbished theater had been turned into a garden by the Trailblazers, a work-recreation-beautification program, along with other local youth organizations, who also painted a new mural along the property edge. The museum’s first displays drew from the resources of the Smithsonian, especially the Museum of History and Technology and the National Zoo, with a setting that showed astronaut suits and a space capsule, an 1890s country store, and a petting zoo. In addition, museum planners set up a hands-on science corner and artist workbenches for working with paint and clay.33

From the outset, Smithsonian museum planners expected that Anacostia exhibit displays would be touched and handled by visitors. Curators from across the Smithsonian Institution frequently provided objects to the ANM that were expendable because they understood they would be frequently handled and feared they would vulnerable to vandalism.34 While on-site staff
generally agreed that some objects would be vulnerable, there was some resentment that this was always expected to be the case.\textsuperscript{35}

During the early months of collaboration with Smithsonian curators and outside consultants, assumptions about the audience created some of the tensions that would strain communication and understanding between established Smithsonian curators and the new Anacostia staff. For some Smithsonian curators and administrators, there was a basic underlying notion that people who lived in slum areas were of a different world and spoke a different language. Some curators assumed that the urban slum dweller lacked “a sense of process” and the experiences of the “physical commonplaces,” such as how to operate a wheelbarrow, play in the bath, or ride a bike.\textsuperscript{36} There was a sense of a wide gulf of different and unknown experiences that the typical museum person did not and could not understand about the people who lived in Anacostia.\textsuperscript{37} Given these institutional biases and misconceptions, the Anacostia museum staff believed there needed to be constant and open communication with the residents. They understood that respect and sensitivity to the audience’s opinions and ideas were essential to the success of the experiment.\textsuperscript{38} ANM staff had to negotiate this mix of condescension and respect. At times offended by the assumptions made about poor people, staff also adapted the various ideas to overcome barriers of communication with local residents and to develop new and different kinds of exhibits. Most of all, the Anacostia staff learned to listen to their audience and to respond positively to their demands.

Very quickly, it became clear to the small ANM staff that the community felt personally invested in the museum and believed strongly that they should take extensive part in the development of exhibits. While hands-on science was interesting and engaging for youth, it lacked any sense of cultural relevance to the wider community. They found that exhibits focusing on Black achievements were the most popular. At the request of community members and visitors to the museum, the Anacostia Advisory Committee “agreed to design future exhibits and programs . . . to include, whenever and wherever possible, themes, artifacts and educational materials that would contribute to the understanding and knowledge of Negro history and culture.”\textsuperscript{39} Such exhibits were intended to not only correct the traditional omission of Black history and culture in museum representations but truly represent American
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history with a fully integrated portrayal. A holistic and integrated narrative, however, was overshadowed by the representation of racial and cultural difference.

Creating Exhibitions

The Anacostia Neighborhood Museum’s opening exhibitions were largely interactive displays adopted from the children’s museum model. Residents selected exhibition topics in public meetings, choosing from numerous suggestions offered by Smithsonian staff from other museums. The Neighborhood Museum’s first major display was a Project Mercury space capsule equipped with working gadgets. Other hands-on activities included a “bone room” where skeletons could be taken apart and reassembled, a closed-circuit television and monitor, and “shoebox” activities, where children could encounter and handle objects. The museum’s first art show was a display of sculpture by a local artist in November of 1967. Called Doodles in Dimension, the exhibition showed the artist’s three-dimensional rendition of doodles made by President Kennedy. While ANM staff and press coverage were positive and enthusiastic about the show, some observers remained critical and were concerned about the museum’s future direction.

Questions about the “museum quality” of ANM exhibits reflected tensions around the staff’s effort to design a new kind of museum, one that actively took on current and sometimes controversial issues. Traditionally the Smithsonian had sought to eschew questions of immediate political import, but the Anacostia addressed them directly. The informal structure of the satellite museum allowed for a more fluid and organic process for the creation of exhibits and made it possible to plan and implement them without the presence of a curator on staff. Exhibition planning flowed from the museum’s advisory committee. Residents and activists pushed for exhibits and programs relevant to the lives of local people.

As the staff began to recognize the need to create immediately relevant presentations, a confluence of circumstances and events stimulated the development of the museum’s first “urban problem” exhibition. The museum maintained a permanent, small zoo for children, and this had elicited some criticism from both staff and visitors. The animals, including birds, snakes, squirrel monkeys, gerbils, hamsters, and small mice, were said to be “noisy, dirty,” and smelly. Children wanted to retain the small zoo at the museum and compromises made it possible. Nonetheless, many visitors remained
wary of the rodents that stayed in the museum, and when a donated pair of laboratory rats went on display, someone poured a can of paint over them. Residents of Anacostia struggled with serious problems regarding rat infestation, the subject of many horror stories among community residents. Likely the protest and vandalism upon the small zoo’s rodents “reflected the deep, abiding hatred that people who live with rats develop for rodents.” Based on these exchanges and events, Zora B. Martin researched and developed the exhibition *The Rat: Man’s Invited Affliction*, which went on display from November 16, 1969, to January 25, 1970.

Both Kinard and Martin made note of skepticism from neighborhood residents and museum colleagues alike, but they believed the support and enthusiasm from some members of the community, especially youth, warranted its production. Anticipating criticism of the show, Kinard asserted, “The Museum does not wish to be a prophet of doom nor is this exhibit designed to lower the morale of the community. . . . The Neighborhood Advisory Committee of the Museum has decided that we cannot afford to present exhibits that deal only with life in the past. Such exhibits must have some relevance to present-day problems that affect the quality of life here and now in Anacostia.”

exhibition sought to educate people and dispel misconceptions about urban rats. It examined the ecological and historical significance of rats while focusing on contemporary means of dealing with them in urban areas. The displays included a simulated rat environment in a backyard to demonstrate “how they [rats] exist and survive, their destructiveness, and disease-carrying potential.”45 Associated programs included a television segment, “Who Do You Kill?,” which dramatized life in the ghetto; an original skit called “RATS” by a local group of young people; and seminars and demonstrations that discussed pest control, housekeeping, and the psychological impact of living with pest infestations.

Another exhibition that dealt with contemporary issues was the show *Lorton Reformatory: Beyond Time*, which went on display in October 1970. In cooperation with men at the Lorton prison facility, ANM created a slide, audiotape, and photograph show about life behind bars. The exhibition was “presented to promote an understanding and appreciation of how the men at Lorton ‘spend the time’ during their sentences” by displaying artwork and crafts by inmates. A recent debate about the future maintenance of Lorton Reformatory was the apparent catalyst to create the exhibition. Congressional hearings had been held to consider transferring the correctional facility from the district to the federal government because of, in part, charges that the facility was wrought with problems. Proponents argued that the district could not handle basic prison operations. Security and discipline were lax. Prisoners were idle without a useful industrial program. Narcotics and alcohol were rampant. Prison guards were harassed by prisoners and had difficulty in dealing with “a new breed of inner-city inmate who has brought with him ‘militant ideas.’”46 Yet proponents overlooked advancements at the facility. Expanded rehabilitation programs had recently made academic courses accessible to inmates through a local college. New vocational training programs had been put in place as well.

The Lorton Reformatory exhibit embodied the principles of Black power and reflected the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum’s focus on urban issues. The goal was to create a forum for discussion and to create a space to hear the voices of the inmates, mostly African Americans from the district. The museum director explained, “A discussion on the causes of crime, on the meaning of justice and penal reform is of paramount importance to all of us. After all, our concern is not for strangers, unknown to us, but for our neighbors—for those related to us by blood and marriage—in a word—our concern is for our brothers.”47 The museum held a “rap session”
in which men without prison records met with former prisoners to discuss and evaluate the programs at Lorton. Live performances and public programs during the exhibition included singing groups, an instrumental band, and a speech-writing group. Thus the exhibition allowed for an alternative view on the experiences of men at Lorton, revealing their creativity, motivation, and hope.

In addition to producing exhibitions about contemporary community issues, the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum quickly broadened its programs to focus on the broader history and culture of Africans and African Americans. Although the museum’s constituents had asked for and appreciated shows dealing with relevant questions, they also felt an aversion to focusing too heavily on problems. Residents expressed their desire for shows about “our Negro heritage.” In response, the museum mounted a number of exhibitions about Black culture and history. For example, *Negro History* (February 1968), displayed during what was then called Negro History Week (now Black History Month), included material from the Harmon Foundation Collection held by the Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery. The exhibit included twenty-eight paintings and two sculptures, as well as a life-sized farmhouse built to represent one in which Benjamin Banneker, the eighteenth-century astronomer and mathematician, might have lived. Martin commented on the exhibition: “As one child was later to say, ‘I’ve never seen so many Negroes in one place in my whole life.’ And this was true. For the first time in the lives of many blacks they were completely surrounded, engulfed, and inundated by images of blackness—Harriet Tubman, Aaron Douglas, Alain Locke, Harry T. Burleigh, Arna Bontemps, and so many others.” It was tremendously important at that moment to many African Americans, especially youth, to see these large, beautiful paintings of distinguished Black Americans. The desire to present African American heroes and role models in history was an intricate part of Black empowerment. The Harmon Foundation Collection had been displayed years earlier at the Smithsonian. Originally intended to inspire racial harmony through the display of Black artists’ achievements in the arts, their inclusion in this exhibition functioned as a source of self-esteem and appreciation for African American heritage.

Another exhibit, *Africa: Three Out of Many, Ethiopia, Ghana, Nigeria* (September 15–December 26, 1973), displayed woodwork sculpture, such as masks, from three African nations. In contrast to the Herbert Ward African Collection on display in the Natural History Museum, the Anacostia
exhibition presented the continent as a country of diverse peoples with varying cultural traditions and vibrant artistic creativity. Anacostia’s *Africa* show displayed African art as a source of ethnic and racial pride. In an introduction to the 1973 exhibition, Kinard wrote, “What is displayed here represents the artistry, the religious inspiration, and the history of a people whose culture has been too long denied. Each object, from the simplest tool to the most elaborate work of art, embodies the best that is within the people who created that culture so that Africa comes alive and speaks to us in a way all men can understand.” Kinard’s statement echoes the sentiments of Black power and avoids the extreme position of Black separatism. African Americans, omitted from representation in American culture and portrayed as disconnected from African cultures, could come to the ANM and witness a great artistry identified as their own heritage. At the same time, non–African Americans would benefit from learning about the long-misrepresented history of Africa and African culture. Thus the exhibit functioned as a resource both for the community to learn about some African heritage and for a broader audience to recognize African culture as worthy of recognition and praise.

During the 1970s, American museums experimented with numerous forms of outreach programs. As a leader of the community-based museum movement, the ANM pioneered activities for outreach to people who still did not walk through the front doors. The museum created a Mobile Division to “take the Museum to the people.” A bright-blue van made the rounds in the neighborhood, carrying portable versions of exhibitions and bringing lecturers to local schools. Fletcher Smith, head of the Mobile Division, described the significance of his work: “What was so unique about this concept? Certainly the idea of taking such a service to the people was relatively new. But even more stimulating was the delivery of an intangible item that many label ‘pride.’ Through such exhibits [on Black history and culture], a river of strength flowed. Young as well as old could begin to drink from the waters of self-worth, a thirst long denied.” Smith’s words epitomize the goals of cultural empowerment advocated by Black power. The Anacostia Museum’s Mobile Division transformed the initial Smithsonian goal of outreach to a distant constituency and advanced the museum as part of the social-political activism of the moment. In responding to the demands of its audience, ANM became a source for creating a sense of an American heritage and identity that did not simply “include” Black people but asserted racial pride and cultural distinctiveness.
The community museum directly challenged the tradition of major museums to present their shows as “apolitical” and above the politics and racial tensions of the day. What many activists argued and the ANM epitomized in its practices was that culture was politicized. Embracing this concept, the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum openly and assertively declared the representation of African American culture as a political endeavor necessary to change social and economic conditions.

Black Culture and Legitimacy in the Museum

The experiences of developing and implementing exhibits in intimate cooperation with the target audience gave ANM staff insight into the workings of a neighborhood museum. One staff member noted that the staff could not plan for its constituents but needed to plan with them. In order to do that effectively, the staff of the neighborhood museum needed to be “sensitive and responsive to the need to understand, analyze and creatively change that which seemed changeless in the minds, spirits—and environments—of those they serve.”56 The original effort to create engaging exhibits evolved into a larger effort to design programs that spoke to the community’s problems, piqued their curiosity, and helped them recognize the vital role they could play in a larger intellectual and cultural world.

In conjunction with exhibit displays, ANM conducted educational workshops, demonstrations, dramatic presentations, and music and dance programs to “bring life” to the traditional exhibit mode of display. Kinard explained the philosophy behind ANM exhibitions to one colleague:

What we do here at Anacostia arises out of the desires and interests of this community and these can be limitless and varied. This adds zest and enthusiasm to the activities. Exhibits are not just something the staff decided would be worthwhile. It has been our experience that when exhibit ideas and the way they should be displayed come from the community, and neighborhood people are involved in the plans as well as the production, the exhibit conveys a sense of truth that cannot be achieved in any other way. This by no means lessens the quality but strengthens it.57

Kinard needed to defend the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum’s approach because prioritizing the demands of their audience had led some to doubt the legitimacy of ANM exhibition practices. Some viewed the exhibitions as
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undermining expertise and lacking objectivity. The ANM was criticized by Smithsonian curators for its lack of organization and for its emotional connections to exhibit topics.

Tensions between the ANM staff and other Smithsonian Institution curators became evident as early as the summer of 1968, during planning for “Negro History” week. During the previous ten months, the museum had mounted numerous small displays and programs leading up to a major exhibition: Benjamin Banneker was featured in *Moments in History* in January 1968, and portraits from the Smithsonian’s Harmon Foundation Collection had been displayed in February. In March, drawing upon the creativity of the local community, the museum invited school groups and art students to develop panel discussions and perform Negro folk music, and the museum also hosted a poetry reading by Sterling A. Brown.\(^{58}\)

But exhibition script development exacerbated tension in the relationship between the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum and the Museum of History and Technology. Input and support from Smithsonian curators and administrators, especially from MHT, had been a typical part of the ANM’s exhibition development process. Left out of the process, Smithsonian curators and administrators questioned the expertise of the selected scriptwriter, Larry Thomas, who had been hired not as a historian but as a designer at the museum.\(^{59}\) The Smithsonian curators argued that only a trained historian with expertise in African American history was qualified for the work. This question regarding expertise was intimately tied to issues of control over exhibition content and process. One Smithsonian administrator addressed the issue: “Any remarks [that criticize the choice of scriptwriter], no matter how mildly phrased, receive an immediate response from John Kinard that bristles with defensiveness. It is understandable that the Anacostia people would want to be in complete control of such a project, but I think there is a danger that this exhibit could become a mish mash of unrelated ideas, mistaken emphasis, and errors that will not reflect credit on either Anacostia or the Smithsonian.”\(^{60}\) What we might dismiss as intellectual disagreements became more intense in the aftermath of the Martin Luther King Jr. assassination riots in April 1968. The heightened emotions and sense of urgency among ANM staff made interactions with other Smithsonian staff extremely difficult. Non-African American staff felt the need to move forward with caution and not be swept up by the intensity of the political moment. In sharp contrast, African American staff members at ANM felt a need to assert control
and self-determination for their institution and for constituency. Their arguments in favor of moving forward echoed those of Black separatists and mirrored debates about rebuilding the damaged city after the riots.61

In spite of skepticism from some curators and staff, the highest ranking officials at the Smithsonian Institution continued to support the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum and to encourage its independence. Dedicated to letting the experiment run its course, Frank Taylor, director of MHT, and Charles Blitzer, assistant secretary of the Smithsonian, insisted that curators and administrators allow the ANM staff to determine how much and what kind of assistance was appropriate.62

A Museum of the Moment
The Anacostia Neighborhood Museum achieved a worthy goal, even if it was not the one originally intended. Secretary Ripley wanted to serve the interests of the Smithsonian Institution by bringing underrepresented audiences to the National Mall. Instead, the members of that target audience influenced and transformed the museum medium, creating an institution that served their own interests. ANM reflected the impulses and desires of engaged, forward-thinking professionals of the times. While not explicitly professing Black power militancy, museum staff of the ANM embraced the spirit of Black power ideals: shaking off the mantel of Western cultural traditions that rendered darker peoples inferior and invisible and instead expressing the desires and asserting the voices of African Americans in the neighborhood. By implementing the “critical practice and visionary politics” of the street, ANM staff listened to, engaged with, and collaborated with neighborhood residents to realize a museum that reflected its primary audience. In doing so, the ANM made it possible to share authority with residents and create new narratives.

By 1975, the museum had grown beyond just a neighborhood operation and, nationally and internationally, came to be recognized as a venue for Black history and culture. Various museum and community representatives looked to the ANM as a model museum that facilitated the cultural life of its immediate constituents and actively worked with young people.63 Yet Kinard had begun to express dissatisfaction with the way Anacostia was viewed by many, both within the Smithsonian and without. Primarily, its location in Anacostia and in the old theater building fostered a wider perception that the neighborhood museum was solely local in scope. This view hampered the possibilities
for ANM to be seen for its national impact and in line with the prestigious position of other Smithsonian museums. Although Kinard hoped to mainstream the scope and purpose of the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum, he also held fast to the vision of a museum that served a specific community. In this sense, he aimed to have ANM make a unique and significant contribution to the museum field. In 1972, Kinard stated, “There are far too many museums whose exhibits say nothing at all to far too many people. They fail to create a special mood or feeling. There is no soul or even heartbeat—no social consciousness or historical continuity. They cater to the interests of a select few and the so-called mighty, assuming to know what everyone wants, when actually the interest of the masses of the people and the various minorities who make up that larger group have never been considered.” Kinard implicitly critiqued the content and activities of the traditional museum and other Smithsonian museums. The museum must move, touch, and be relevant to a broader audience, Kinard argued, rather than educate at a distance. Placing the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum on the vanguard, he sought to push the Smithsonian as a whole in a new direction that would lead the museum world.

For some Smithsonian curators, however, the very existence of a museum dedicated to African American history and culture was anathema to the integrationist commitments of their own work and what they believed to be integral to the Smithsonian’s larger mission as an arbiter of the nation’s culture. For instance, the Smithsonian’s Museum of History and Technology selectively avoided racial and ethnic-specific history. The atmosphere of the late 1960s made a focus on African American history problematic. The development of the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum at once made it easier for the Museum of History and Technology to avoid producing its own work about African Americans while confirming some people’s fears that the topic would only politicize museum activities.

The creation of the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum was a unique moment of potential transformation for the Smithsonian. In its early years, the ANM created a space that challenged the Smithsonian to be more responsive to criticism from those ignored by traditional museum practices. The Smithsonian’s experimental museum allowed for a venue that was intimately connected to place and community, a museum that worried less about an “official” narrative and more about its primary constituents, the neighborhood residents. However, the museum’s founding director had noticed the
effect of physical marginalization (located off the Mall) and psychologically (outside the Smithsonian “family”). Thus Kinard pushed to have the ANM recognized as a unit of the Smithsonian’s Art and History Museums division, rather than as a bureau in the Public Programs division, in 1985.

The ways that the sentiments of Black power had influenced and shaped ANM programs made for a successful experiment. However, to move beyond the experiment and continue to grow as a Smithsonian entity, the ANM would shift its persona to look more like a traditional museum. It moved out of its remodeled storefront and into a new building built for its museum purposes. The new look reflected new practices as well, including hiring a professionally trained staff, starting a collection program, and creating public programs that addressed a broader national (and later even an international) audience. Nonetheless, into the 1980s, as a separate, Black museum, the Anacostia Museum would continue to serve a targeted audience that did not feel welcome or respected in mainstream museums, even when those museums made efforts to tell stories about Black history. At the same time, although an emphasis on Black history and culture was crucial to the early development of ANM, the rhetoric of Black pride had ultimately and ironically undermined the integrationist aspect of its mission.

Notes


3 John R. Kinard (1936–89) was the director of ANM from 1967 until his death in 1989. He was a native Washingtonian and cultivated a career in community service. See John R. Kinard, interview SIA, 1987, John Kinard Oral History Interview, RU 9538.


5 Zeller, 49–52.

6 Quoted by Zeller, 56.
Zeller. 


Allan Schoener, introduction to *Harlem on My Mind*; Zeller, “From National Service,” 55; Burns, *From Storefront to Monument*, 104. Incidentally, before opening the show, the Metropolitan Museum of Art invited the Smithsonian to consider the exhibition for their galleries. However, the potential cost prevented the Smithsonian from making any commitments and the notion was suspended. Thus the Smithsonian was never involved in the controversy generated by the show. S. Dillon Ripley, letter to Thomas G. Hoving, June 4, 1968; Robert W. Mason, memo to Ripley through Mr. Warner, cc: Messrs. Anglim, Blitzer, Kinard, Taylor, and Mrs. Marsh, October 2, 1968; Ripley, letter to Charles Blitzer, October 3, 1968, SIA, Assistant Secretary for Public Service, RU 145, box 2.

12 Kinard, interview SIA, 13.


15 In the 1960s, E. Franklin Frazier’s study of the Black middle class, *Black Bourgeoisie* (New York: Macmillan, 1957), was cited frequently.


strong. Opposition was not directed at the idea of curricular reform. Rather, debated centered on the programs’ form, focus, and status.


26 Anacostia residents Alton Jones Stanley Anderson served as chairman and vice-chairman, respectively. Nighbert, “History of the Museum,” 5.

27 Nighbert.


29 James, 21; Kinard, interview SIA, 13.

30 Kinard, 12.

31 Nighbert, “History of the Museum,” 6. As the museum’s success became apparent and federal monies were increased, more of the staff were employed full-time and still more joined the team with support from grants and private funds. By the fifth-year anniversary, ANM listed twenty-one people on its staff.

32 Nighbert, 4.

Repeatedly, advocates of ANM stated that incidents of theft and vandalism were nonexistent and indicated that this was overlooked. Marsh, “Neighborhood Museum That Works,” 13.


The local artist was Ralph M. Tate. Brownlow Speer described the Tate exhibition as “a good beginning with a brilliant success” for a WTOP Radio editorial on November 23, 1967. Clipping included in SIA, Assistant Secretary for Public Service, RU 145, box 2. However, another review questioned the artistic quality of the sculpture and the reflection of such a show for a Smithsonian endeavor. Jack [Anglim], memo to Zora Martin, n.d., SIA, Assistant Secretary for Public Service, RU 145 box 2.


The Rat: Man’s Invited Affliction (exhibition booklet), November 1969, SIA, Exhibits ANM, box 3. In the summer of 1969, the DC health department reported that the infestation level in Anacostia was 67 percent, more than four times the recognized “critically high” level. Zora B. Martin, “A Guide for the Teacher in the Urban Area,” n.d., SIA, Exhibits ANM, box 3.

Rat (exhibition booklet).


Lorton Reformatory.

Kinard, interview by SIA.

The Smithsonian received nine hundred works of art—only a small portion of which are paintings—as a gift from the Harmon Foundation in 1967, shortly after the philanthropic organization had closed down.

Anacostia Neighborhood Museum (fifth anniversary booklet), September 15, 1972, p. 14, SIA, Assistant Secretary for Public Service, RU 145, box 2.


Zeller, “From National Service,” 54. The art mobile concept, in which a mini gallery traveled to local communities in a trailer, had taken off in the 1960s, and the Smithsonian's National Collection of Fine Arts (NCFA) proposed such an endeavor in 1964. See The Mission and Projects of the National Collection of Fine Arts, report, 1964, SIA, Central Administrative Files, NCFA, 1908–74, RU 313. Notably, NCFA had been circulating traveling exhibits since 1952, when the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibit Services (SITES) was established. The scope of SITES exhibits expanded into crafts, history, technology, science, and education in 1966.


John Kinard, memo to Dr. R. S. Cowan, September 2, 1968, SIA, Public Service, box 2.


John Kinard, memo to Dr. R. S. Cowan, September 2, 1968, SIA, Public Service, box 2.

Anacostia exhibits schedule, minutes, August 2 and 19, 1968, SIA, Public Service, box 2.

John E. Anglim (chief, Office of Exhibits), memo to Mr. Frank A. Taylor (director, MHT), August 19, 1968, SIA, Public Service, box 2.


Frank A. Taylor (director, MHT), memo to Mr. Anglim, August 23, 1968, SIA, Assistant Secretary for Public Service, RU 145, box 2.

The ANM is described as a successful neighborhood museum in Edward Alexander, Museums in Motion: An Introduction to the History and Functions of Museums (Lanham, MD: AltaMira, 1979), 224–25. Its wider impact on the museum world is discussed in Kenneth Hudson, Museums of Influence (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 179–81. John R. Kinard met with museum heads from Europe and Africa to discuss the goals and activities of the museum, such as when Tongolese officials met with Kinard in 1975.

John R. Kinard, memo to Charles Blitzer, February 6, 1974, SIA, Exhibits ANM, box 4. In 1987, the ANM changed its name to the Anacostia Museum and opened
in a new structure located in the middle of a landscaped public park, one mile from the Carver Theater building and next to its laboratory-research center, which had been built in 1975.

65 Anacostia Neighborhood Museum (fifth anniversary booklet), 2.
67 James, “Building a Community-Based Identity,” in Heritage, Museums and Galleries.
68 Burns, From Storefront to Monument, 139–40.